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SUBJECT: SPAIN: WORST NUCLEAR INCIDENT SINCE 1992

REF: 04 MADRID 4241

1. (U) SUMMARY: Recent discovery of corroded cooling tubes inside the Vandellos II nuclear reactor near the Catalanian city of Tarragona appears to represent the worst nuclear incident in Spain since the 1992 discovery of faulty sensors in the cooling system of the Trillo nuclear reactor near Guadalajara. The Vandellos II incident was first publicized earlier this year by Greenpeace Spain, but received greater publicity after a highly critical report by the Nuclear Security Council (CSN - Spain's Nuclear Regulatory Commission equivalent) was leaked to pro-government daily "El Pais" in early April.

2. (SBU) Julio Barcelo, one of the CSN's Commissioners, told ESTHOFF April 13 that while the Council continues to analyze the events at Vandellos II, it was almost certain that the incident would be officially characterized as a "level 2" accident (on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the most serious). Press reports that the reactor's owners (energy sector giants IBERDROLA and ENDESA) could face fines of up to three million euros. Barcelo, while not trying to minimize the reactor operators' transgressions, argued that the CSN's strong reaction shows that Spain's nuclear regulatory framework remains effective. He said that though the issue would likely stay in the public eye until the CSN's final report (and fine) are unveiled in the fall of this year, the incident at Vandellos II would not likely have a lasting impact on the "whither nuclear energy" debate in Spain. End Summary.

3. (U) The April 8 edition of "El Pais" reported that the CSN had issued a "devastating" report criticizing the Vandellos II nuclear power facility for attempting to minimize and cover up the discovery of severe corrosion of several pipes feeding Mediterranean waters to cool the "primary circuit" of its nuclear reactor. The pipe corrosion itself reportedly caused no immediate danger, but could have eventually facilitated a failure of the overall reactor cooling system. The CSN report, which represents the public opening of its investigation, accuses the reactor's operators, electricity sector giants ENDESA and IBERDROLA, of "insufficient vigilance over the cooling pipes," a "lack of general sensitivity ... about the importance of security," putting "emphasis on production over security," and "hiding and delaying handing over information to the CSN." The report notes that the facility's owners had changed reactor maintenance companies in 2002 and that the new company had significantly reduced maintenance efforts, thus facilitating the pipe corrosion.

4. (U) "El Pais" reports that ENDESA and IBERDROLA have admitted maintenance deficiencies, but have tried to shift the blame to the company (unnamed) holding the reactor maintenance contract. It quotes an owners' spokesman saying "since we did not know of the problem, we could not inform the CSN." Both the owners and the CSN have stressed that there was never a serious risk of radiation release. The corrosion was reportedly detected after the cooling pipes began to leak in May, but the reactor operators did not inform the CSN until August (after the end of the summer season of peak electricity demand). The reactor is currently shut down for refueling and for implementation of 60 "corrections" demanded by the CSN. Four CSN inspectors are supervising the implementation of the "corrections."

5. (SBU) The CSN has initially deemed the incident to be a "level 1" accident on its scale of 1 to 7 (with 7 being the most serious). However, CSN Commissioner Julio Barcelo (U.S. NRC Commissioner equivalent) told ESTHOFF April 13 that the CSN would almost certainly raise the incident's status to "level 2" when it releases its final report (which he thought would be in September or October). Barcelo did not minimize the operators' transgressions, but claimed that the CSN's strong reaction demonstrates that Spain's nuclear regulatory framework remains effective. He expected that IBERDROLA and ENDESA would receive a "serious" fine, which media reports could mount to up to three million euros. Barcelo expected intermittent media interest until the final report/fine is announced this fall. He did not think the accident would

have a serious impact on the "whither nuclear energy" in Spain debate, which he noted would not really get going until 2008 (when the next reactor permit renewal decision must be made -- see reftel).

16. (SBU) COMMENT: The CSN has been criticized by Greenpeace and some "Green" politicians for its lack of transparency. In fact, Greenpeace's efforts forced the CSN to release the April 7 interim report. Barcelo said the CSN would have preferred to finish its investigation before going public. Trying to take advantage of the situation, some "Green" politicians have proposed "whistleblower" legislation that would protect nuclear sector workers who go public with safety-related concerns. But we have detected little enthusiasm within the ruling Socialist Party (PSOE) to take on CSN reform. The PSOE does not like public attention focused on the nuclear sector. During its 2004 national election campaign, the PSOE publicly called for the gradual phase-out of nuclear energy in Spain. However, it now realizes that Spain cannot effectively fight global warming (i.e., reduce greenhouse gas emissions), without the roughly 24 percent of current Spanish electricity consumption provided by the country's nine greenhouse gas-free nuclear reactors. Thus, while the CSN will likely take a hard line regarding Vandellós II (to show that it is effectively carrying out its oversight mandate), we doubt that either of Spain's two leading political forces will attempt to exploit the nuclear safety issue for political gain. Spain's reliance on nuclear power is a "clean little secret" that few want to reveal.

17. (SBU) NOTE: The CSN report and other investigation-related materials provided by Barcelo have been pouched to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (attention Cindy Rosales Bush, Office of International Programs).  
MANZANARES